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Spirit Synott: Dancing Queen

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The Toronto Rehabilitation Institute is at the forefront of one of the most important and emerging frontiers in health care today—rehabilitation science. As the University of Toronto's fully affiliated and specialized teaching hospital in adult rehabilitation and complex continuing care, our goal is to advance rehabilitation and enhance quality of life for the one million Ontarians who experience disabling injury and illness.

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How to live The New

By Dr. Don Low



With the last SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) patient released from hospital in Toronto late this summer, and winter and flu season fast approaching, it's time to apply what we've learned in order to keep us all healthy in the future.

Perhaps our most important lesson is that we live in a global village, and with

international travel we're potentially 24 hours away from any infectious disease. This realization reminds us just how important public health is in the community and how vital infection control is, particularly in the hospital setting.

Steps are being taken to ensure that if SARS or a SARS-like virus comes into our community again, we are better prepared. The Ontario government has issued new SARS directives to hospitals and a national advisory committee on SARS has submitted recommendations to the federal government. Researchers continue to seek a SARS vaccine and Mr. Justice Archie Campbell is conducting a SARS inquiry. In the meantime, there are changes that members of the public will see in the health care setting and steps we can take as individuals to help stop the spread of infectious disease.

The best advice I can give to you and your family as we head into the winter months is to get your flu shot. We have many years of experience with the influenza vaccine. It is safe and it works—yet many people still hesitate to get a flu shot.

Influenza is a serious disease with many complications. It is associated with a significant mortality rate. The flu also can masquerade as

Spirit OF DANCE

For Spirit Synott, dance is
"an emotional release,
a spiritual connection,
a form of prayer."



Above: Going through the paces in a Debbie Wilson dance class.
Right: Spirit and Indar Singh, a patient in the spinal cord rehabilitation program at Lyndhurst Centre, enjoy a dance session.



She flies across the dance floor with the speed, agility and grace of someone in full command of body, mind and spirit. Yet Spirit Synott cannot walk across the room. She has learned to propel herself in and outside of her wheelchair in fluid, breathtaking movements that have inspired choreographers, dancers and audiences alike, and encouraged others with disabilities to make dance a part of their lives.

"Dance is permission to express yourself, permission to be silly and have fun," says Spirit. "Dance is therapeutic on the most basic level—to make sounds and move our bodies. It's part of our humanness and our culture."

Born with spina bifida, a congenital condition of the spinal column, Spirit leads dance workshops for children and adults with disabilities, including the patients at Toronto Rehab's Lyndhurst Centre, home of the hospital's spinal cord rehabilitation program. "I'm not teaching so they can become dancers," she explains. "I'm teaching so they have another outlet to express themselves. It's a way of being socially interactive."

At a recent workshop, "there were a lot of wallflowers at the beginning," recalls Lynda Charters, therapeutic recreationist. "But Spirit shines when she's performing. It's like a lightbulb goes on—it's infectious! By the end of the session, she had quite a group dancing up a storm in the gym."

"As a leisure interest, dance provides patients who have spinal cord injuries with a creative outlet for self-expression," Lynda says. "This facilitates improvement in physical and social skills while increasing participation in an activity our patients did before their injury or illness." In addition to the physical, social, emotional and creative benefits of dance, people can improve their wheelchair skills by learning to move their chairs in rhythm to the music.

"When you become physical, there is a moment when all the problems in the world are gone," adds Debbie Wilson, Artistic Director of OMO Dance Company and one of Spirit's teachers and mentors. For several years, Debbie has offered periodic workshops in

dance for Toronto area residents with disabilities. "Spirit is the person who challenged me to think outside of the box," she says.

Spirit has been a guest performer with OMO in several shows at the Betty Oliphant Theatre. She also has appeared in documentary films, on television and on stage as a solo artist, in duets with able-bodied partners and in ensembles. She has studied and performs ballet, modern dance as well as African and Caribbean folk dance.

"I don't make a living at dance," says Spirit. "It's difficult in the arts for anybody; it's ten-fold when you have a disability."

But that doesn't stop Spirit from focusing her life around dance. "It is in my blood. For me, dance is an emotional release, a spiritual connection, a form of prayer."

"The more visible I can be, the more people will say, 'If she can dance, maybe I can too.' Or maybe it will help them find the courage to try something else that will make them happy." ❧



Dance fever has hit the stroke service at Toronto Rehab's University Centre. Each Friday morning, patients who have had strokes come together with staff to dance for half an hour. The dance group—launched over a year ago—began as a pilot project to "focus on improving balance and coordination," says Louis Biasin, physiotherapist. "Dance is a fun and social way to work on these skills." An evaluation of the pilot was so positive that the dance group has become a regular event. "The smiles on the faces of patients are reward enough," adds Louis. "Dance is good for the spirit."



Anthony Guerra is a favourite dance partner.